IS OUR WAY THE ONLY WAY?
June 7, 2009

Franklin & Marshall
Ecumenical Service

JOHN M. BUCHANAN

"Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are. . . .
I found an altar with the inscription,
'To an unknown god.'"
Acts 17:22 (NRSV)

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and minds to your word, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

A few years ago then President George W. Bush and Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia met at the President's Texas ranch. Among the topics they discussed was prayer. "Abdullah told [the President] that he relies on God when he makes tough

decisions, and the president said he prays a lot to God to guide him as well" (Maureen Dowd, *New York Times,* 1 May 2002).

Which raises the eternal question of the relationship between religions that make exclusive truth claims. The crown prince is a Muslim. The president is a Christian. Is ours right and all the others wrong? Is ours more true than others? Or are all religions ultimately equal, each striving in its own way, with its own history and culturally influenced symbols and institutions, to know the unknowable? Is our God the only God, our way the only way, all the others counterfeit? Some think so. It wasn't all that long ago, after all, that the head of the Southern Baptist Convention

announced confidently that God doesn't even hear the prayers of non-Christians.

Distinguished scholar Martin Marty recently offered a helpful reminder that Allah is simply the Arabic word for God.

So the issue is, when a Muslim and a Jew and a Christian, each speaking Arabic, pray to Allah, who is listening? What exactly is happening? Are there three deities? Is there one God who hears all three prayers, or one God who chooses one prayer and hits the delete button for the other two?

The question is no longer purely academic. Two new realities have put us in a new place. The first is the unprecedented religious diversity of our

own culture. The world was always religiously diverse, and in that wonderful diversity, the United States for two centuries reflected Western Christianity or at least something called the Judeo-Christian tradition. But with the impetus of a new immigration policy and globalization, we have become a genuinely religiously pluralistic culture, the most pluralistic in the world. If you travel much you know that there is no place quite like ours.

When I was Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) I traveled around the world to greet partner churches — every time I returned to Chicago and walked the lakefront and saw Hispanic barbequing, Korean softball, Indians strolling in saris,

Guatemalans playing soccer, African Americans grilling ribs — I thought this is a remarkable place — there is no other place like this.

The second new reality, of course, is what happened to us on September 11. There was more than religion at the heart of the Al Quaeda zealots who committed suicide while taking the lives of some 3000 Americans, but a form of radical Islam provided the theological/philosophical context and ultimately the rationale for what they did. And almost immediately two popular spokespersons for the radical Christian Right in this country announced that God had allowed the attack to punish America for feminism, homosexuality, and abortion rights.

“Dear God, save us from the people who believe in you,” someone scribbled on a wall in Washington in the days following September 11. Maureen Dowd wrote in the New York Times:

> **“Forgive me, but something is badly awry. I was taught that religion should invocate sympathy, patience, compassion, understanding, forgiveness, a love of peace. Instead, the name of God is used to justify vices that are the opposite of these virtues.”**

We are in a new time and place, and there is no more critical issue before us than this one: the relationship of our

faith/our religion to the faith and religion of others different from us, but with whom we must share a country, a culture, a world grown smaller and more dangerous than ever before.

In or about 55 A.D., a Christian missionary who also happened to be a sophisticated thinker arrived in Athens. His name was Paul. Athens at the time was several centuries past its days as the center of the Western world. Socrates had died 450 years earlier. The political focus had shifted west to Rome. Commerce was spread among other Greek cities. What Athens still excelled at, however, was philosophy. There were two famous schools of philosophy, the Epicureans and the Stoics. There was a university in Athens, and in the center of

the city at a place called the Areopagus, an outcrop of rocks, the philosophers gathered every day to debate. You can still visit it, climb on the rocks, and imagine the lively conversation going on all around you. The marketplace is not far away, and I can imagine the people of Athens browsing through the busy market stalls and stopping by the Areopagus to listen in for a moment.

When he came to Athens and spoke first in the local synagogues, Paul was brought to the Areopagus to make his case. What follows is fascinating. It is, someone noted, a brilliant piece of classic rhetoric. Paul accommodates to his listeners, acknowledges their interest in religion and theology, even acknowledges seeing many altars in the

city, surely a sign of profound spirituality. He even names one of them: the altar to the unknown God. Paul knows enough Greek philosophy to use it in his argument, referring to God as the one "in whom we live and move and have our being," a phrase he borrowed from a sixth-century B.C. philosopher by the name of Epimenides of Crete. "We too are his offspring," he says, taking a phrase from Aratus of Soli, who three centuries earlier said that very thing about Zeus: "We are his offspring." (See *Texts for Preaching, Year C.*)

Paul makes two important points, and the way he does conveys his own deep respect for the views of the Greeks, whom some would have called pagan. They have a big theology, a big

God concept. Even though they have a lot of idols, the one dedicated to the unknown god shows that they know that God can never be limited by something human beings construct. That puts them on common ground with a basic premise of Judaism and Christianity, namely that there can be no idols because an idol limits God and God, in what Jürgen Moltmann calls God's God-ness, cannot be limited—not by an idol made of wood or stone, not by a temple, not by a creed, not by a theology, not by a church.

The first consequence of belief in one God is theological modesty. It is to know that no one has all the truth. It is to acknowledge that we put our ultimate

trust in God, not things people have said about God.

And the second consequence is openness to the truth other people and other religions know. Presbyterian theologian the late Shirley Guthrie says that when Christians hear Jesus say "I am the way, truth and the life: no one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6), they take that to mean that because Jesus is the only way to salvation, Christianity is the only true religion. And that has led, far too frequently, to exclusivism, arrogance, and intolerance.

Guthrie suggests that we ask who is this Jesus who says "I am the way." He is the one who also says, "I have other

sheep that do not belong to the fold. I must bring them also. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16).

Christianity is my religion, my theological and, in many ways, my cultural home. But this is bigger than Christianity. This is about a God who creates all people and to whom all people are related and in whom all people live and move and have being.

And so, Professor Guthrie argued, we are not only permitted to enter respectful dialogue with people of other faiths but obligated to listen with respect and to learn the truth they know. And in our evangelism, we are not to argue the superiority of our religion and the exclusivism of our truth but to

share what we have come to believe and trust and to receive the same from the other.

Does it mean that everybody makes it in the end, that no one is lost? Or the reverse, that only the Christians are going to get into heaven, or more commonly, only certain kinds of Christians, the Catholics, the Presbyterians, the elect, the Baptists, the Lutherans, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Born Agains.

I love the story about the man who appeared at the pearly gates and asked for a guided tour. "Of course," St. Peter said, "follow me." So down the golden streets they went. As they passed a great hall — they heard robust singing.

“Who are they?” the man asked. St. Paul answered — “Those are the Methodists, they love to sing hymns.”

Next, a large hall — rigorous speakers and lots of responses — “Amen! Preach it brother — bring it home!” — “Those are the Black Baptists.”

Next: a buzz, people talked, not loudly, but business-like, earnestly discussing in groups assembled around tables . . . “Those are the Presbyterians — they think that heaven is a committee meeting.”

The next hall — quiet, people sitting very still . . . seemed to be praying. “Those are the Episcopalians” Peter

said. “We have to be quiet — they think they’re the only ones here.”

It’s an all-purpose story — you can substitute Catholics, UCC, Lutheran — whatever.

There seems to be a deep human need to know that we’re going to get there, but they aren’t, or I am but you’re not. And I think we must confess—and this is what I deeply believe—that we don’t know enough to say that. Or that we *do* know enough about the mystery of a God who transcends every human construction, that we do know enough of the God of creation, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, never to place that sort of limitation around God.

Elmhurst College, IL professor Ron Goetz was invited to preach at the funeral of the father of two friends of his, a man who was an atheist. He said, on the occasion:

> **"I would hope that grace, which God intends for the salvation of all humanity, is not so fragile that it cannot stand up to human unbelief."**

What about people who don't believe? Or people who believe differently? I don't think we know enough to be sure of the mind of God. Professor Goetz said at his unbelieving friend's funeral:

“Surely, God could never conclude that there is no other choice, given the trouble we make for God, but to damn all but a chosen few to eternal rejection” (“Grace Is Wide Enough,” *Christian Century,* 19 October 2000).

Paul honored the Athenians’ search for truth represented by their many idols, and particularly the altar to the unknown god. There is something honorable about the search itself, something common to all human beings, something holy about the longing for God. “Thou hast made our hearts restless until they find their rest in thee,” St. Augustine wrote centuries ago. And he was right. We are restless,

we long for truth, for certainty, for assurance; we search for God in one way or another all our lives.

And what Christian faith maintains, not so much as an intellectual truth to be quoted and recited as a person to be trusted, is that in Jesus Christ, God has come to the world with mercy and grace and love and forgiveness; that God wants to reconcile the world and is busy doing that in ways that are far beyond our ability to see or understand.

What happened to us on 9/11 was not only a vivid demonstration of how divided the world is — racially, ethnically, religiously — it was also an impetus to get to work, to learn about the other — to find common ground, a

place to stand together, and work together for the peace which will ultimately save the world.

Some of us experienced something of like that on an unforgettable occasion right in our sanctuary. It was Friday, September 14, 2001, and we were in a community worship service sponsored by Holy Name Cathedral, Chicago Sinai Congregation—our Jewish neighbors two blocks west on Delaware—and Fourth Presbyterian Church. We were reeling in the aftermath of the events that had happened three days earlier on September 11. It was unlike anything any of us had ever experienced before. It seemed that we were suddenly under attack by people who hated us for being who we are: Americans. People had

attacked us, killed thousands of our fellow citizens for no other reason than they happened to be Americans. And they had done it in the name of God. And one could not help but ask, “Whose God? What God?”

The sanctuary was full as it never had been: every seat filled, aisle and narthex crowded with people standing. I delivered a brief homily. Father McLaughlin said a few words. Rabbi Michael Sternfield of Sinai Congregation was to pray, and when he stood up to pray he did the most remarkable thing. He asked us all to pray together, out loud, each in our own voice, our own faith language. He invited the Jews to pray the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead, the Kaddish, and he invited

the Christians to pray the traditional Lord's Prayer, taught to us by a Palestinian Jew. And he invited Muslims to pray a prayer as well. And we did. And our voices mingled—Hebrew, English and some Arabic. Our prayers wove together and filled the sanctuary and rose together to the one God of us all, the one God who hears every prayer, the one God who loves each and every one of us and will never, ever give up on any one of us, and whose grace and mercy exceeds anything you and I, or anyone else for that matter, could ever think or imagine.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.